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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001312

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 LEADERS AGREE TO RUN UNIFIED
LISTS IN ELECTIONS

REF: BEIRUT 1296

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) March 14 leaders, meeting as a group for the first time since August 3, agreed to run unified lists in the spring 2009 elections, a major step forward for a coalition whose leaders have found it difficult to look above partisan interests to the greater goal of maintaining the parliamentary majority. Participants described the meeting in positive terms, with all agreeing on the importance of putting on a unified front. Discussion of individual candidacies was deferred to smaller, follow-up committees. After the meeting, the leaders issued a statement condemning what they viewed as Syrian President Asad's attempted encroachments on Lebanese sovereignty. End summary.

¶2. (C) March 14 leaders met the evening of September 4 at majority leader Saad Hariri's Qoreitem residence, their first meeting since August 3. Attendees included Hariri, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt, former President and Kateab leader Amine Gemayel, National Liberal Party leader Dory Chamoun, Ministers Mohamad Chatah, Ghazi Aridi, Wael Abu Faour, Mohamad Safadi, and MPs Nayla Mouawad, Boutros Harb, Solange Gemayel, Marwan Hamadeh, Elias Atallah, Michel Pharaon, Antoine Zahra, Samir Franjeh, Setrida Geagea, George Adwan, former MPs Ghattas Khoury, Camille Ziadeh, (and March 14 SYG) Fares Suaid, and Hariri advisor and cousin Nader Hariri.

¶3. (C) Druze MP and Minister of State Wael Abu Four told Pol/Econ Chief September 5 that the meeting was "good." According to Abu Four, the leaders (especially Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Kateab leader Amine Gemayel, and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea) discussed how to consolidate their ranks in the run-up to the 2009 parliamentary elections, agreeing to run as a unified coalition and on the importance of giving the impression of coalition unity. They also agreed that the next step was to look at the electoral map to determine which candidates to run in the elections. The leaders asked March 14 SYG Fares Suaid to follow up with smaller committee meetings. The leaders themselves will meet every two weeks, and March 14 ministers will hold a separate meeting prior to each cabinet session to coordinate their

positions, Abu Four said.

¶4. (C) Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury also described the atmosphere as good, noting that no one made any provocative remarks and Druze leader and MP Walid Jumblatt was "calm." (Note: Asked whether the leaders discussed the appointment of the next G-2 Intelligence Director, Abu Four relayed that Jumblatt and Hariri had held a tete-a-tete on the issue, but was unable to provide further information. End note.) The intention of the March 14 statement issued following the meeting (text provided in paragraph 11, below) was to mobilize March 14 supporters, he said.

¶5. (C) Nader Hariri told Pol/Econ Chief September 4 that the meeting was "very good" and made progress, adding that, "We are now all on one team." Jumblatt, calling March 14 a "rock" that was working together, was "great," Nader said enthusiastically. He added, however, that Jumblatt was preaching to the converted. Admitting that there were still traces of "minor inter-Christian problems" following the debate over cabinet formation, Nader said they were "on the verge of being contained." For example, MP Nayla Mouawad still had problems with MPs Samir Franjieh and Mansour LeBon, he said, and only came for the "photo opp." Nader was quick to deny, however, any lingering problems with Ghattas Khoury. (Note: Khoury had asked us for suggestions on whom to invite to his August 29 dinner in honor of visiting NEA DAS David Hale, adding, "Anyone but Nayla!" End note.).

¶6. (C) Elie Khoury, advisor to Samir Geagea, confirmed that the two main issues addressed were the elections and the

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violence in north Lebanon, and that the leaders agreed to run in the elections in full harmony. "We will stick together," he said, despite rumors of differences within March 14. As for the north, Khoury warned that some people were exaggerating the issue of extremists for political gains.

¶7. (C) National Liberal Party leader Dory Chamoun called the meeting excellent and very cordial. Some attendees tried to raise the issue of candidacies for the parliamentary elections, he reported, but the issue was "closed."

¶8. (C) Zghorta MP Nayla Mouawad also called the meeting good, adding that it was useful in overcoming the misunderstandings that resulted from cabinet formation. (Note: Mouawad lost her cabinet seat in the shuffle -- especially for Christian seats -- that has left bitter feelings among March 14 Christians. End note.) Mouawad reaffirmed that the leaders did not delve into the details of parliamentary candidacies, and that they agreed to form unified electoral lists in all the districts. Although she saw March 14's popularity as increasing, March 14 still needed to get its act together. Commenting on Hizballah's August 28 attack on a Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) helicopter (reftel), Mouawad said that the mother of the LAF officer killed in the attack removed pictures from her home of Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah and his ally, Free Patriotic Movement Michel Aoun, after the incident.

¶9. (C) March 14 SYG Fares Souaid said the March 14 leaders opened supported the March 14 General Secretariat and agreed to run as a unified coalition in the elections. He also praised the statement issued following the meeting condemning President Asad's statements on Lebanon.

¶10. (C) Tripoli MP Mosbah Ahdab did not attend the meeting, calling March 14 meetings "useless and not producing anything new." "I am not making any public criticisms of March 14, but I will not attend meetings anymore, because I do not know how decisions are made and I am not ready to bear the consequences for something I was not involved in," he said. (Note: Although he has not publicly left March 14, as did National Bloc leader Carlos Edde, Ahdab has been at odds with fellow Sunni leader Saad Hariri following Hariri's decision

not to include him in the cabinet. Hariri reportedly told Ahdab he would rather see him in the next cabinet, rather than the current short-lived cabinet. Ahdab dismissed this argument since Hariri then went on to advocate Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury for one of the Christian cabinet seats -- a move that was eventually opposed by other March 14 Christians who argued Khoury, as a member of Hariri's Future Movement, had no political weight with March 14 Christians. End note.)

¶11. (U) Unofficial Embassy translation of the March 14 statement follows:

Begin text.

First: President Asad's remark asking President Sleiman to send the LAF to the north is a flagrant interference in Lebanese domestic affairs, which also indicates that Syria does not acknowledge Lebanon's sovereignty and independence. Additionally, it is an insult to the president himself and the presidential office.

Second: The Syrian President's call on Lebanon to enter peace negotiations with Israel also falls within the framework of interference in Lebanon's domestic affairs, which we reject; it also torpedoed the Taif Agreement, which clearly stated Lebanon's commitment to an armistice agreement with Israel. Therefore, all this talk is totally rejected. The Lebanese national interest is decided upon by the Lebanese political authority that is represented by the Council of Ministers and not by decisions made by any party in the near or far region, especially since the unwavering Lebanese position is its commitment to the Arab Initiative. Lebanon will be the last Arab state to sign a settlement (sic) agreement with Israel after regaining all the Arab rights.

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Third: March 14 rejects all pressures made on the free and independent media in Lebanon, notably the pressure that was exerted on L'Orient le Jour, which is considered an objective and free forum the Lebanese society is proud of. End text.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Our constant hammering -- along with that of our MEPI-sponsored NGO partners -- appears to be paying dividends, albeit none too soon. The key now will be to maintain the momentum, and not allow lingering resentments -- especially Christian-Christian -- from the cabinet formation to flare up again in the debates over which blocs' candidates will run in each district. We will continue to urge our March 14 contacts to keep their eye on the big picture -- a March 14 parliamentary victory -- rather than individual victories, but overcoming Lebanon's feudal political system, in which all politics is local, is bound to be a rocky road. End comment.
SISON